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WRMC doctor offers 'pacemaker' for depression

White River Medical Center has announced that it is the first in the area to offer vagus nerve stimulation therapy as a long-term treatment specifically approved by the Food and Drug Administration for treatment-resistant depression.

And Dr. Witold Czerwinski is the first physician in the area certified to manage VNS therapy.

VNS therapy is approved as a long-term add-on treatment for patients 18 years of age and older who are experiencing depression that does not improve with traditional treatments such as medication and counseling. VNS therapy is the first treatment specifically studied and approved for treatment-resistant depression. White River Medical Center's first patient was recently implanted with the VNS therapy system for treatment-resistant depression.

VNS therapy is delivered from a small pacemaker-like device implanted just under the skin in the chest area that sends mild pulses to the brain via the vagus nerve in the neck. A thin, thread-like wire attached to the device runs under the skin to the left vagus nerve. The vagus nerve serves as the body's "information highway" connecting the brain to many major organs. The impulses stimulate the central part of the brain that controls mood and emotion.

Patients with the device continue traditional therapy such as medication and counseling. The device is monitored by the patient's psychiatrist. At regular intervals during follow-up visits, the psychiatrist obtains readings from the device and adjusts it as needed. The device is powered by a long-life battery that will last from six to 11 years.

In clinical studies of VNS therapy, more than half of the patients who had experienced an average of 25 years of major depressive disorder

and multiple treatment trials realized some clinical benefit, one-third of the patients had at least a 50 percent improvement in their depression, and one out of six were depression-free after one to two years of treatment with VNS therapy.

Patients also reported significant improvements in quality-of-life areas, such as vitality, mental health, emotional well-being and social functioning.

Major depressive disorder is one of the most prevalent and serious illnesses in the United States, affecting nearly 19 million Americans every year. Of those, 20 percent, or approximately four million people, experience depression that does not respond to multiple anti-depressant treatments. For these people, treatments including psychotherapy, anti-depressant medications and even sometimes electroconvulsive therapy do not work, or they work for a short while but stop working over time. VNS therapy is an important treatment option for these people.

"Patients with treatment-resistant depression need additional options," Czerwinski said. "The availability of VNS therapy is an important treatment option for millions of people who, until now, have not had access to a proven long-term option to control depressive symptoms. It is especially important to know that clinical study results have shown that some patients achieve increasing benefits from VNS therapy over time and experience sustained results. Additionally, VNS therapy is very tolerable, and side effects typically diminish over time."

For more information about VNS therapy, call the White River Health System Behavioral Health Clinic at 262-1357. Information is also available at www.vnstherapy.com or by calling 1-877-NOW-4-VNS.